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ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A1

NEW YORK TIMES
12 March 1986

NASA WILL LAUNCH EARTH SATELLITES USING ITS ROCKETS

By DAVID E. SANGER

The space agency has decided on a major revision of its space operations by shifting to a mixed fleet of shuttles and unmanned rockets to launch earth satellites, officials of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration confirmed yesterday.

Under a new policy, prompted by a Federal interagency group in the six weeks since the explosion of the Challenger shuttle, the space agency will move to encourage private space companies to launch satellites that previously would have been sent aloft by the space shuttles.

Until the Jan. 28 explosion of the shuttle, with the loss of seven crew members, the space agency had consistently opposed using expendable unmanned missiles to put military and commercial satellites in orbit, saying that its four shuttles were the best and most competitive vehicles for that purpose.

'Consensus Is Emerging'

But in a memorandum to Richard Truly, the new director of shuttle operations, William R. Graham, NASA's Acting Administrator, wrote last Friday that "a consensus is emerging" within the Reagan Administration to rely increasingly on the unmanned rockets, known as "expendable launch vehicles."

The loss of the Challenger and resulting delays that will stop shuttle flights for at least a year, Mr. Graham wrote, "create circumstances that are substantially different from those of the preaccident era."

Mr. Graham also ordered that the space agency decline to take on new commitments for launchings in the forseeable future, and that it break off negotiations with Britain to launch one of Britain's communications satellites.

Cost Put at $3.2 Billion

Testifying on Capitol Hill yesterday on a different aspect of the shuttle loss, Mr. Graham estimated that the cost of replacing the Challenger at $3.2 billion. That figure included $2.2 billion for a new orbiter and about $1 billion for the loss of equipment on board the shuttle and the cost of fixing design defects, primarily in the solid-fuel rocket booster, that contributed to the explosion. The Challenger itself cost $1.5 billion when it was constructed in the mid-1970's.

The space agency's new strategy, which was developed in meetings by the interagency study group that guides all of the Government's space activities, comes as NASA faces growing competitive pressure to find a way to make up for the loss of the Challenger, one of four shuttles.

Intelsat, the international nonprofit group that operates communications satellites, announced Friday that it would use the French Ariane unmanned rocket service to launch its next two satellites, both previously scheduled to be sent aloft on the shuttle. Japan and China are rapidly preparing launching vehicles of their own, and are wooing NASA customers.

Meanwhile, the Defense Department and the nation's intelligence agencies have grown increasingly anxious in recent weeks that key classified satellites could not be launched unless an alternative to the shuttle was found.

In his memorandum to Mr. Truly, released by NASA yesterday, Mr. Graham said that the space agency's customers should be told that "the U.S. looks forward to the development of a viable, competitive, domestic commerical capability that may in the foreseeable future be able to satisfy their launch service requiments."

Privately, NASA officials said yesterday that the agency decided it was preferable to insure that American vehicles are used to launch satellites, rather than lose business to the French.

"We know that from now on, we can't keep all our eggs in one basket," one high ranking NASA official said. "This was the only option."

But NASA officials conceded yesterday that they were uncertain how they would help build an unmanned rocket capacity. The agency does not have the resources to build the unmanned launching vehicles itself, space agency officials say, particularly as it attempts to replace the Challenger. And space agency officials add that they do not want to force any of the shuttle's customers to use unmanned vehicles.

A handful of small private companies, some run by veterans of the space program, have attempted to compete directly with Ariane, but they have met little success. Executives of the companies have complained bitterly that both the French rocket program and the American shuttle service receive heavy Government subsidies, and they say they cannot match the approximately $75 million it costs to send up a full shuttle or Ariane payload.

But yesterday, executives of those companies welcomed NASA's move to embrace the unmanned rocket business. "We think the shuttle should be reserved for things only it can do, and then off-load the other things to other systems," said Deke Slayton, a former astronaut who now runs Space Services Inc., a Houston-based company that has struggled to enter the business.

But Mr. Slayton said that many of the shuttle's payloads might not be suitable for launching in his rockets. Some of the smaller cargo, he said, required human handling, which was the shuttle's advantage over unmanned rockets. And the largest payloads, such as satellites, might be too heavy for his rockets to lift, he said.

The Department of Transportation some time ago created an office to promote private space initiatives, and an official there, who asked not to be named, said yesterday that unmanned rockets were becoming more and more attractive as Government officials attempted to solve the launching crisis created by the Challenger disaster.

When the shuttle was first conceived in the early 1970's, NASA officials justified it by saying it would fulfill three purposes: promoting research and development in space, serving the defense department and intelligence agencies and launching commercial satellites. But only the last of those three proved a way for the agency to recover some of the costs of the program, and agency officials said yesterday that the loss of business to unmanned vehicles meant shedding some of the shuttle's most profitable operations.

"We will definitely lose some reimbursements," said Chester Lee, director of customer services and business development for the agency. But, because of the Challenger accident, he said: "We have a considerable backlog, and for the first time we think commercial expendables should be able to move in. This is a billion dollar industry, and the United States should not lose it to Ariane."

Analysts said that they viewed NASA's new policy as an indication that fixing the shuttle in the wake of the accident may take longer than first expected. "The signal here is that maybe there isn't a quick fix," said Anthony J. Cipriano, chairman of the space commerce roundtable, a group of business people and and investors interested in space commercialization.

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